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ABSTRACT

Too often, language arts programs neglect nonverbal expression and interpretation, forgetting that they play a vital role in face-to-face communication and interaction. However, it is important that children learn to understand nonverbal messages, especially nonverbal devices manipulated by ad people and political personages. A variety of activities for involving grade-school children both in the fun of creative, nonverbal expression and in the interpretation of nonverbal messages range from simple kindergarten projects with pictures to a sophisticated sixth-grade study of impression management as used on television commercials and political telecasts. (JM)

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Nonverbal Language Study

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What is it that children study when they study language? In answering this question as teachers, we generally concern ourselves with helping children develop facility in using our verbal language system. We suggest reading to children to help them systematically acquire the rules for creating sentences -- rules that young children internaliz , not memorize. We sometimes project early writing-down activities that encourage young children to devise their own spelling systems. We propose free writing as a bridge to learning to read.

All of these activities, of course, are vitally significant aspects of language study in elementary classrooms. Reading about and writing down are important, and it is not my purpose here to suggest otherwise. But I submit to you that if our emphasis on verbal language study causes us to ignore the acquisition of nonverbal language skills, then we have ignored an aspect of communication especially significant to young people growing up in a world in which mass media deliberately are using nonverbal language to manipulate opinion.

In the past we have tended to leave nonverbal expression and interpretation out of our language arts programs. As a

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matter of fact, the word nonverbal has carried a negative connotation in some contexts. We term some children "nonverbal," meaning they talk infrequently or not at all or have a limited standard vocabulary. In deemphasizing the nonverbal we may forget that in the adult and the child's world nonverbal language plays a vital role in face-to-face communication and that to function effectively in interaction, we must be able to handle nonverbal language skills. Recent explorations in kinesics by Birdwhistell, Scheflen, Goffman, and others verify the importance of the nonverbal in human interaction. The work of these investigators suggests that gesture, eye focus, stance, gross body movements, touch, distance, timing, and even appearance sometimes communicate more than is communicated in actual words. It further suggests that through language study young people should be growing in both verbal and nonverbal competencies.

Although we in education have tended to deemphasize nonverbal language, manipulators of public opinion have been using the impact of the nonverbal to the fullest. Consider, for example, a well-known TV commercial--El Exigente selling Savarin. Dressed impeccably, head held high, body ramrod straight, face expressionless, El Exigente is the demanding one. His every move communicates that he expects the best and will accept only the best. Remember the point in the commercial

when El Exigente lifts a cup of Savarin to his lips. At that point a smile breaks across his previously stone-like face, and the viewer knows that El Exigente has found a good cup of coffee. When the demanding one finally speaks at the end of the commercial, his few words are extraneous. He has already said it all without words.

Consider also the purposeful use of nonverbal language on political telecasts. Reporting on one of Mr. Nixon's last TV performances as President, Newsweek (May 13, 1974, p. 21) commented:

> The speech as a performance was masterfully done--perhaps the best in a year's Presidential utterances on the scandals. Mr. Nixon's hair was freshly trimmed for the occasion, and the Oval Office thermostat was turned low to keep him from sweating; the transcripts were stacked up theatrically on a table beside him, bound in green plastic loose-leaf covers to heighten the appearance of sheer bulk.

On that occasion many of us were well aware that nonverbal language was being deliberately manipulated to create a particular impression. But are we as aware when we hear other political telecasts? Ford has hired an expert in nonverbal communication to direct his speech-giving performances. Every detail is being managed from the fire burning in the fire place to the ties Mr. Ford wears, to the pictures of the family members propped nearby, to the way he gestures with hands and props himself informally against a desk edge.

The ad people and the political manipulators have begun to understand the impact carried by the nonverbal in communication; perhaps we in education need to react to this change in the mass media and attend to the nonverbal so that our students will be able to communicate nonverbally and also be able to recognize nonverbal devices manipulated by others.

How can we include the nonverbal in our language arts programs? Let me begin an answer by talking first about the manner in which we encourage young children to express ideas and feelings. We may encourage youngsters to write out their ideas using their own creative spellings; this, of course, is fundamental as an introduction to the written patterns of our language. But emphasis on writing out at the expense of other forms of expression ignores the fact that recording is difficult for the young child. In writing out, the child concentrates on wielding pencil and producing letters; in the process, he or she may lose the idea.

That this is so can be shown by comparing the stories that young children talk out to stories they write out. Leslie, a five year old, dictated a story onto a tape:

> Bugs Bunny was walking, and a duck came up and said, "Hi, pal. Are you flying south for the winter?"
>
> "No, I am not," said Bugs Bunny. "Bunnies can't fly."
>
> The duck said, "I will take you. Just hold on to my hand and we will go." So they went to the South Pole for the winter. (from Hennings and Grant, Content and Craft, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973)

She followed with a second story:

> Charlie Brown was walking one day. Snoopy came up and waved to Charlie Brown, but Charlie Brown said, "Get out of here, Snoopy," because Charlie Brown didn't want Snoopy that day. (from Hennings and Grant, Content and Craft)

The stories that this little girl wrote out by herself were less creative; they were less creative both in sentence patterns and ideas than the pieces she talked out.

Even more creative than either her written out stories or her talked out stories, however, were her nonverbal monologues and dialogues. I introduced her formally to the nonverbal in communication by playing fantasy ball with her. I pretended to hold in my hands an immense ball that was very bouncy and light. To start, I told Leslie about my imagination ball. I told her that even though she could not see the ball, she could tell by the way I held it just what it was like. I told her I would play with it and then throw it to her. When she caught it, she too would play with it and then convert it into any other kind of ball she wanted.

I extended both my arms, bounced the imaginary ball, and threw it high into the air. I caught it as it came back down and threw it to her. Leslie caught it, pretended to drop it, and bent to retrieve it. Then she carefully placed the imagination ball upon her head--without prompting--and balanced it there. Suddenly she sagged under its weight

as the imagination ball in her mind became tiny and heavy. She physically groaned as she took the now weighted ball from her head and with pretended effort passed it back to me. Using our imaginations freely, we played fantasy ball together.

Next, I suggested to Leslie that she tell a whole story all by herself without using any words, by just pretending to be something like a mechanical robot, or a puppet on strings, or a stretchy rubber band, or a piece of clay. She would tell her story through her actions.

Leslie chose to be a rubber band that kept stretching until finally she snapped and collapsed on the floor. I only wish that I had a videotape of her story, for it was delightfully creative expression which she herself enjoyed thoroughly.

There are numbers of ways we can involve children like Leslie in the fun of nonverbal expression. For example, we can ask children to think about how a seagull feels as it soars through the air. To the accompaniment of "Ebb Tide," youngsters can become seagulls; they can use their bodies to tell of the happy seagull or conversely they can become unfortunate seagulls and express their feelings with their bodies.

Older children in teams can be given word cards labeled with emotion words such as interested, bored, fatigued, eager.

As teams, they construct a nonverbal sequence that communicates the feelings written on their cards. Then they play the scene while classmates attempt to decipher the emotional message being sent nonverbally.

These kinds of activities, which some teachers do include in language study, involve young people in nonverbal expression --the sending of messages through gesture, stance, facial expression, and so forth. Through such study young people will find that nonverbal talk gradually becomes a natural component of the language they speak.

But as with oral verbal communication in which there is an output dimension--speaking--and an imput dimension--listening--so there are two sides to the nonverbal process of communication--expressing messages and interpreting the nonverbal messages of others. Parenthetically let me say that I believe interpretive skills are just as important as expressive skills, especially in a today when people live in front of the TV set with its endless commercials. Television does manipulate nonverbal devices as a form of impression management. Are we preparing young people to interpret these devices?

Some teachers are involving children in interpretation of nonverbal messages. For example, a kindergarten teacher snipped a series of people-pictures from magazines, mounted each picture on construction paper, and drew empty comic

strip-type balloons from the mouths of each person in a picture. In a talk session, her children brain-stormend what the picture characters were thinking. She guided the brainstorming with questions such as:

* Does the picture character look happy? angry? fearful?
* Do the picture characters like one another?
* What clues tell us?

The children produced both amazingly perceptive and delightfully original responses. One picture showed a woman dressed in apron and holding a potato masher. The children concluded that the woman was unhappy and angry; the expression on her face and the way she held the masher told them that. Asked to fill in the thought balloon, they agreed on: "My husband is not home yet, and this food will go bad. I am mad. I'm going to eat all the food and not leave any for him" The teacher of this class followed up the picture study with a brief talk-time; youngsters identified some of the clues we use in real life to decide what people are really thinking.

A third grade teacher mounted a mirror over the sink where his students went to get a drink. Next to the mirror the teacher placed a sign (from Hennings, Smiles, Nods, and Pauses: Activities to Enrich Children's Communications Skills, New York: Citation, 1974):

How do you feel today?

Happy? Sad? Tired? Angry? Glad to be here? Lonely? Curious?

Read your own expression in the mirror

to find out.

This teacher too used a follow-up discussion of nonverbal communication to help students perceive the importance of facial expressions in communication.

In contrast a sixth grade teacher involved her class in a sophisticated study of impression management as used on TV commercials and political telecasts. Students watched commercials and studied the manner in which performers used nonverbal language. They asked themsleves questions such as:

* What messages is Mr. or Mrs. X sending through gestures?
* What messages is the performer sending through use of distance? through timing? through touch?
* What does the manner in which the performer holds his/her body tell us about the performer?
* What messages are being sent by choice of clothes, hair style, jewelry? by the way the performer sits?

These young people had a great time with some of the Alka Seltzer commercials and with commercials in which a real person like Mr. Perdue and J.G. sell their own products. Next they analyzed speeches of politicians to see if they could detect instances of impression management--instances in which nonverbal devices were being manipulated purposefully to create a particular effect.

These sixth graders went on to study the nonverbal

language of people they knew. They used observation guides to record aspects of body language. They looked for clues that indicated a person was employing nonverbal devices as a facade to create a positive impression. Through their study these young people became more aware of the impact of the nonverbal in communication and became more effective listeners to the nonverbal expression of others.

* * * * *

The theme of our conference this weekend is Changing World, Changing Children, Changing Communication. I submit to you that in this changing world, oral communication is becoming more important than ever. More people are gaining impressions on which they base their opinions -- not from the written word -- but from the TV evening news, presidential telecasts, and talk shows. People are deciding what brand of a product to purchase based on manipulation of information on TV commercials. The world too is growing smaller-- as we have heard repeatedly, and people of differing backgrounds are communicating with one another more often. As people of different cultures come together, they find that the nonverbal language they speak is almost as different as the verbal language they speak.

Perhaps given these changes, we need to be sure that in language study, children encounter the nonverbal as well as the verbal, and grow in both verbal and nonverbal language skills.